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ABSTRACT

This report provides a conceptual framework for guiding decisions regarding the administrative delivery and course content of the freshman orientation seminar. The proposed framework relies heavily on empirical evidence generated by college-level research in the areas of student retention, student learning and academic achievement, and student development. The report proposes and discusses 10 guidelines for course administration and 7 topics for course content. It is noted that such guidelines may be especially relevant today because the alarmingly high rate of attrition among first-year students makes an effective freshman year orientation seminar more critically important than ever. Among the guidelines present are: (1) that institutions should offer a full-semester freshman course, i.e, "student adjustment" or "student success" course; (2) the orientation course should be conducted as a credit-earning course; (3) college faculty should be involved; (4) small class sizes should be adopted by using multiple sessions; and (5) upper-class students should be used as counselors or peer mentors. Among the suggestions for course content are: areas involving self-concept and self-esteem; problem solving and decision making skills development; learning skills and strategies; and interpersonal relations. Contains 117 references. (GLR)

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Monograph Series
Number 4

The Freshman Year EXPERIENCE

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THE FRESHMAN ORIENTATION SEMINAR: A RESEARCH-BASED RATIONALE FOR ITS VALUE, DELIVERY, AND CONTENT

Joseph B. Cuseo

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National Resource Center for
The Freshman Year Experience
University of South Carolina
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The Freshman Orientation Seminar: A Research-Based Rationale For its Value, Delivery, and Content

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Abstract. Student attrition is a significant problem in American higher education, but most attrition is voluntary and is heavily influenced by institutional characteristics. Early and intrusive support for students is one institutional characteristic known to enhance retention; the freshman orientation seminar can provide this early and intrusive support. An extensive research review indicates that the freshman orientation seminar is effective for promoting student persistence and academic achievement. However, substantial interinstitutional variation exists in course content and administrative delivery of the freshman seminar, some of which may reflect absence of a conceptual framework for guiding such decisions. This report attempts to provide a decision-making framework—one that is grounded in empirical research at the college level—and proposes ten guidelines for course administration and seven topics for course content.

Introduction

In American higher education, beginning college students are more likely to leave their initial institution than to stay and complete their degree. For instance, in 1986, approximately 2.8 million students began college for the first time. An estimated 1.6 million of these students will leave their first institution without receiving a degree, and approximately 75% of these students who depart from their initial institution will leave higher education altogether—without ever completing a degree program (two-year or four-year). In short, about 40 of every 100 college entrants will leave the higher education system without earning any type of college degree. "Over the four-year sector generally, the total rate of four-year degree completion can be estimated to be roughly 61%—i.e., 39% of all entrants depart the higher education system without their four-year degree" (Tinto, 1987, p. 17).

The attrition rate for certain minority groups is even more alarming. For example, a 1986 Census Bureau report revealed that the college dropout rate for black and Hispanic students is approximately twice that of white students (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1986), and the dropout rate for American Indians is estimated to be over 80% (Guzette & Heth, 1983). Other research indicates that only one in seven blacks and one in ten Hispanics who enroll in college after high school will achieve senior status in four years (Mingle, 1987). After completing a recent, comprehensive review of the research literature on student diversity in higher education, Smith (1989) flatly concludes, "Retention is a cause for national concern" (p.19).

Given these alarmingly high rates of attrition, it seems short-sighted that recent concerns about "accountability" and "quality" in higher education have focused almost exclusively on student-outcomes and value-added assessment. Percentage of students retained (i.e., who persist from entry to graduation) would appear to be an equally valid and more basic index of institutional quality. Student-outcomes and value-added measures of college impact may become secondary issues if substantial numbers of beginning students are not present at graduation to have their "outcomes" measured or to assess how much value their college experience has "added" to their development.

Research clearly indicates that the freshman year is a critical period during which students are most likely to withdraw from higher education. At least one half of all students who drop out of college will do so during their freshman year (Noel, 1985; Terenzini, 1986), and many of these students will leave during the first six to eight weeks of their initial semester (Blanc, Debuhr, & Martin, 1983). After summarizing three years of campus-visitation findings and extensive survey data sponsored by the Carnegie foundation, Boyer (1987) succinctly concludes,

"Students find the transition from (high) school to college haphazard and confusing" (p. 21).

Furthermore, there is evidence indicating that institutional characteristics have as much or more impact on college withdrawal than do student characteristics. The majority of students who leave college are not "forced" out because of academic deficiencies, personal problems, or financial difficulties (Noel, 1985); rather, they are more likely to leave because of dissatisfying experiences with the institution they are attending (Noel, 1985).

> Though the intentions and commitments with which individuals enter college matter, what goes on after entry matters more. It is the daily interaction of the person with other members of the college in both the formal and informal academic and social domains of the college and the person's perceptions or evaluation of the character of those interactions that in large measure determine decisions as to staying or leaving. It is in this sense that most departures are voluntary. Student retention is at least as much a function of institutional behavior as it is of student behavior (Tinto, 1987, pp. 127, 177).

Research on minority students, in particular, indicates that one key institutional characteristic associated with minority achievement is the provision of "advising and support services that do not assume that students easily negotiate the collegiate environment" (Richardson, 1987, p. 4).

The convergence of these research findings suggests that (a) institutions should provide student support intrusively by assertively delivering support services to students, rather than simply waiting and hoping they will take advantage of available institutional support on their own; and (b) intrusive institutional support should be delivered early in order to combat this disturbingly high rate of freshman attrition in a proactive manner. As Levitz and Noel (1989) contend, "It has been our experience that fostering student success in the freshman year is the most signficant intervention an institution can make in the name of student persistence" (p. 65).

This contention is supported by research indicating that freshman orientation programs effectively promote student retention by integrating new students into the college community (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986). A large body of evidence provides even more impressive research support, indicating that the benefits of freshman orientation are enhanced when the program is extended into a full-semester course for beginning freshmen. Based on a longitudinal study of 3318 students at 44 colleges/universities of various types, Forrest (1982) concluded,

> Probably the single most important move an institution can make to increase student persistence to graduation is to ensure that students receive the guidance they need at the beginning of the journey thru college to graduation .... This guidance system should begin well before students arrive on campus and should continue as a formal course during the first term on campus (p. 44).

More recently, the University of South Carolina has collected data indicating that students who have participated in the freshman seminar course have exhibited higher sophomore retention rates than non-participants for fourteen consecutive years (Fidler, 1991). Furthermore, seminar participants also are more likely to persist to graduation (Shanley & Witten, 1990). Similar retention-enhancing effects of the freshman seminar have been found for "high-risk" students who did not meet regular admission requirements, as found by Rice (cited in Fidler & Hunter, 1989).

The effects of freshman orientation seminars have also been studied through research which compares the performance of course

participants with a "matched" control group of students with similar college-entry characteristics (e.g., similar SAT scores, basic-skills placement scores). Results of studies by Cartledge and Walls; Farr, Jones, and Samprone; Stupka; Von Frank, Jones, and Samprone (cited in Fidler & Hunter, 1989) using quasi-experimental research designs indicate that course participants have significantly higher retention rates.

Freshman orientation seminars also have been found to produce statistically significant effects on academic achievement. GPAs of course participants are significantly higher than those achieved by matched control groups of non-participants (Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Stupka, 1986; Wilkie & Kuckuck, 1989). Furthermore, research by Potter and McNairy (cited in Fidler & Hunter, 1989) and Fidler (1991) indicates that participation in these seminars raises the academic performance of low-achieving students (as identified by below-average SAT scores and high school rank) relative to that of students with more qualified admission characteristics. After reviewing the research on the relationship between academic performance and freshman-seminar participation, Fidler and Hunter (1989) conclude that the findings reported thus far "suggest that the freshman seminar can help the talented student perform better academically while at the same time helping weaker students survive" (p. 228).

In addition to the educational advantages of promoting student retention and academic achievement, there is evidence that freshman orientation seminars are cost effective. Revenue generated by increases in student retention more than offsets course expenditures (Ketkar & Bennett, 1989).

In sum, there is now a substantial body of empirical evidence which supports the value of the freshman orientation seminar for promoting students' persistence to graduation and level of academic achievement, as well as institutions' fiscal stability by enhancing retention of enrolled students. Arguably, there may be more empirical research supporting the value of the freshman orientation seminar than for any other single course offered in higher education, simply because traditional courses have never had to document their value empirically; the mere force of tradition and departmental territoriality assure their perpetual place in the college curriculum.

Though the educational and economic advantages of the freshman orientation seminar are well documented, the content of such a course and its manner of administrative delivery are questions that have yet to receive definitive answers. A compilation (University 101, 1983-1989) of current freshman seminar courses reveals wide variation in their content and administrative delivery across different institutions of higher education. Some of this variation may reflect cross-college differences in educational mission and philosophy and, as such, reflects the healthy diversity among American colleges and universities. However, some of this variation may suggest lack of standardization and confusion stemming from an inadequate framework for guiding decisions regarding course administration and content. Critics and stonewallers of the freshman seminar are likely to capitalize on such variation in order to denigrate the course's value and viability. Therefore, freshman orientation seminar programmers should address variation that may be related to lack of appropriate standardization or inadequate course administration.

The primary objective of this report is to provide a conceptual framework for guiding decisions regarding (a) the administrative delivery and (b) course content of the freshman orientation seminar. The proposed framework relies heavily on empirical evidence generated by college-level research in the areas of student retention, student learning and academic achievement, and student development.

Administrative Delivery of the Freshman Seminar

Following are ten recommendations for administrative delivery of the freshman seminar:

1. *Institutions should offer a full-semester freshman seminar course (i.e., a "college adjustment" or "student success" course) for all entering freshmen during their initial semester on campus.* If financial or administrative constraints prohibit its delivery to all incoming students, then at least offer such a course to students who would profit most from it—e.g., high-risk, "special admits." California State University - Fresno, one school cited for its exceptionally high minority retention rate, offers a two-unit "College Planning Skills" course for academically high-risk students. On-site investigation of this program by researchers from the Educational Testing Service (ETS) reveals that many students regret that the course is only available to students experiencing academic difficulties; they suggest that all students would benefit from such a course (Clewell & Ficklen, 1986).

Extending freshman orientation into a full-semester course assures sufficient time for in-depth, comprehensive coverage of the range of topics pertinent to successful college adjustment. A second advantage of extending orientation into a full-semester course is that it allows for timely discussion of college adjustment issues as the need arises during the critical first semester. For example, students encounter information on note-taking and learning strategies at the time these skills are being required of them in their other courses. Discussion of test-taking strategies could be specifically scheduled just prior to midterm exams. These strategies could then be applied by students during midterms, and follow-up feedback on their applicability could be generated after students receive their midterm test results. Thus, a learning cycle consisting of (a) teaching/modeling, (b) practice, and (c) feedback can be achieved when student-success skills are taught in the context of a full-semester course. Such a three-step, learning cycle or "loop" is consistent with the educational principle of "praxis" (reflection-action-feedback), advocated by adult learning theorists (Kolb, 1984) and supported by an extensive body of research at the precollege level (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986).

Timely discussion of adjustment problems and solution strategies as they are being experienced should increase the likelihood that students will perceive the immediate relevance/usefulness of orientation information, thereby increasing their motivation to attend to and master it. Upcraft and Farnsworth (1984) point out that, "Too often, orientation planners overwhelm students with anything and everything they might need to know. Orientation planners must not only decide on what entering students need to know but when they need to know it" (p. 30).

Pennington, Zvonkovic, and Wilson (1989) provide empirical evidence suggesting the need to provide students with support during the semester. They also found that students' satisfaction with college changes at different times in the semester—with an appreciable "dip" in satisfaction occurring at midterm. Because there is a significant relationship between student satisfaction and student retention (Noel, 1985; Terenzini, 1986), providing students with ongoing seminar support during the first semester may serve to reduce mid-semester attrition. In effect, offering a full-length course to first-year students converts the freshman "orientation" program (serving only a preparatory function) into an ongoing freshman "adjustment" program that is responsive to current student needs.

A third advantage of delivering orientation as a full-semester course is that it provides continuity of interaction between the orientation instructor and his/her students. This continuous contact enables the instructor to monitor the progress of freshman students closely during their critical first semester, and

allows sufficient time for "bonding" (development of social-emotional ties) between students and teacher. Significant peer bonding may also develop among class members because they experience regular contact with fellow freshmen and have a structured, ongoing forum for discussion of adjustment problems that arise during the often stressful first semester. Boyer (1987) succinctly captures the gist of this recommendation, "After the flush of newness fades, all new students soon discover that there are term papers to be written, course requirements to be met, and conflicts between the academic and social life on campus. Students need to talk about these tensions" (p. 51). The vital need for provision of such continuous social support to freshmen during their first semester is underscored by research indicating that more than half of all dropouts leave college during their freshman year (Terenzini, 1986), many of whom depart during their first six to eight weeks on campus (Blanc, et al., 1983).

2. *Institutions should conduct the freshman orientation seminar as a credit-earning course in which students receive grades affecting their GPA.* This should generate a more serious attitude toward the freshman orientation experience by elevating it to the same level of academic legitimacy and creditability as any other college-level course; plus, the incentive of a course grade should serve to increase student motivation to become actively engaged with the seminar material. As Gordon and Grites (1984) categorically state, "Credit for the course? The answer is a simple 'yes.' Without such official recognition by the institution, neither the students nor the instructor can maintain the levels of motivation and interest necessary for the course to achieve its intended outcomes" (p. 317). Additionally, Gardner (1989) argues that, "Academic credit is a necessity for the ultimate institutionalization of these courses, because credit is the grand legitimizer in American higher education" (p. 245).

Evaluating students' seminar performance in an academically rigorous fashion and holding them responsible for their learning should increase their degree of involvement in the program and decrease the risk of their perceiving orientation as an auxiliary "light-weight" frill. This is supported by student-survey research which indicates that students prefer to take freshman orientation seminars for credit (Carney & Weber, 1987).

Another advantage of conducting freshman orientation as a credit-earning course is that students may be less prone to perceive the information as remedial. For instance, exposing students to information on learning strategies as part of a bonafide, credit-earning course may be perceived as less stigmatizing than having individual students report to the learning center for the purpose of "repairing" their academic deficiencies. Taylor (1987) reviewed research on the effectiveness of academic support services and concluded, "Remedial education is working primarily because it assumes that underprepared students are not dumb, they simply lack certain skills. If they can be taught these skills in a non-stigmatized environment, the research indicates they can compete with their fellow classmates and go on to complete their degrees" (p. 83). Clewell and Ficklen (1986) examined programs and policies at four predominantly white institutions which had unusually high minority retention rates, and found that one characteristic of these four successful institutions was "non-stigmatization of participants" receiving academic support. The freshman seminar may be one mechanism for delivering academic support in such a non-stigmatizing fashion.

3. *Institutions should consider offering the freshman orientation seminar as a general education requirement.* This recommendation is offered with the realization that it may raise strong political opposition on campus. However, if such opposition can be overcome or avoided, making course participation a requirement for graduation (rather than an

optional "elective") would guarantee that all students would reap the course's benefits. The political feasibility of implementing this recommendation is supported by recent survey data, which reveal that over 20% of institutions with student enrollments under 5,000 now offer a mandatory credit-earning orientation course (Strumpf & Brown, 1990).

Research has confirmed the commonly held suspicion that students who most need assistance are often the least likely to seek it out on their own (Friedlander, 1990). This is an especially unfortunate phenomenon, since studies indicate that participation in student-support programs results in higher levels of student retention and achievement (Kulik, Kulik, & Schwalb, 1983). Thus, to be effective in promoting retention, freshman orientation, like any other student-support program, should be delivered intrusively, rather than offered passively.

> The passive offering of student services, programs, and opportunities is not enough, in most cases, to meet the needs of students. An active, dynamic approach is necessary to reach the students who might otherwise leave without ever bothering to consult a college faculty member or official, without finding the answers that could have made a difference (Beal & Noel, 1980, p. 94).

Such an intrusive approach may be more important today than at any other time in the history of American higher education because of the rising number of commuter students attending college (Astin, Green, & Koen, 1987). Commuter students now account for an estimated 69% of all entering freshmen (Rice, 1989). These students are known to spend less time on campus (Terenzini, 1986), thus rendering them even less likely to seek out campus support services and to become actively involved in campus life. The amount of time students spend on campus may be a key factor contributing to the higher attrition rates of commuter students as compared to residential students (Astin, 1975, 1977; Chickering, 1974). Intrusive delivery of student-support services in the form of a required orientation course might be one way to deliver supportive information and services to this growing number of commuter students and, in so doing, promote their retention.

4. *Institutions should integrate the freshman orientation seminar with their pre-college orientation program.* There are distinct advantages associated with an orientation program that students experience prior to the start of classes. The pre-college orientation program can (a) serve as a vehicle for providing a special welcome for new students—a time during which all the institution's attention and resources are directed exclusively at the freshman; (b) capitalize on students' initial excitement and enthusiasm about starting college, thereby creating a favorable first impression of the institution and a positive "anticipatory set" for the upcoming experience; and (c) allow new students an opportunity to bond informally with each other and with other members of the college community (e.g., faculty, student-development professionals, student leaders, or peer mentors). There is evidence that involvement in pre-college, freshman-orientation programs increases the level of students' social integration which, in turn, correlates positively with sophomore-year reenrollment (Pascarella et al., 1986).

Unfortunately, these benefits of freshman orientation may never be experienced by many students because attendance and involvement in such pre-college programs often have been optional. However, if the freshman seminar were extended to include the pre-college program as its initial component (thus making it an integral part of a required credit-earning course), then student attendance and level of involvement in the orientation program could be enhanced.

5. *Institutions should offer multiple sections of the freshman orientation seminar to insure small class size.* In order for students to discuss

comfortably the sensitive issues likely to arise in an orientation course (e.g., student adjustment problems or student dissatisfaction with certain college procedures) and to foster the development of close student-teacher and student-student bonding, class size should be small enough to allow for such intimacy to develop. The University of South Carolina limits its seminar class size to 20-25 students by offering over sixty sections of the course (Jewler, 1989).

Hopkins and Hahn (cited in Fidler & Hunter, 1989) provide empirical support for the academic advantages of offering the freshman seminar in small classes. They found that students who enroll in small seminar sections achieve higher first-semester GPAs than students who enroll in larger sections.

It may be worthwhile to explore the possibility of offering individual course sections that are designed especially to meet the unique needs of student subpopulations (e.g., special sections for returning adult students, commuters, transfers, student athletes, honors students, or students with the same major). Gordon (1989) articulates the advantages of offering special sections for students with the same major.

> There are significant advantages to organizing freshman seminars by academic program area: specialized academic information, familiarity with faculty in that area, career exploration, and an opportunity to confirm an initial career choice. For example, a thorough introduction to business or the profession of engineering can be conveyed (Gordon, 1989, p. 196).

6. *Institutions should involve college faculty in the freshman orientation seminar.* Boyer (1987) contends that the following "key question" must be asked when assessing the effectiveness of an institution's freshman-orientation program, "Is the orientation program actively supported by the faculty?" (p. 288). If possible, have the college's best teaching and student-oriented faculty serve as instructors for different sections of the course. (If this cannot be achieved, at least have such faculty serve as occasional guest lecturers and/or discussion leaders.) After comprehensively reviewing twenty-five years of retention research, Pantages and Creedon (1978) concluded that one potentially potent approach for reducing student attrition is increased faculty-student interaction during the freshman year, including greater faculty involvement in the orientation program.

The importance of student-faculty contact and front-loading of outstanding teachers and advisors are two often cited recommendations in the retention literature (National Institute of Education, 1984; Noel, Levitz, & Associates, 1985). Moore, Peterson, and Wirag (1984) provide empirical evidence supporting this recommendation and also found that faculty involvement in orientation programs has positive effects on students' academic development. Tammi (cited in Fidler & Hunter, 1989) also found that participants in a freshman seminar report significantly more informal contacts with faculty than do nonparticipants.

Faculty involvement in the freshman seminar would seem to be an effective way to implement the dual advantages of student-faculty contact and front-loading simultaneously. Involvement of faculty in freshman orientation should also serve to increase their sensitivity to the significant personal adjustments which adolescents (and returning adult students) must make upon entering college and may enhance the student advising skills of faculty. Furthermore, faculty involvement in orientation would improve the program's credibility and elevate the significance of student support and student retention to the level of a college-wide concern, rather than limiting it to an "extracurricular" job performed exclusively by student affairs professionals.

7. *Institutions should use the freshman orientation seminar as a mechanism for exposing*

beginning students to key support-service professionals. These would include the director of counseling services, director of learning assistance center, director of the health center, peer counselors, and off-campus community professionals (perhaps as part of a general orientation to the surrounding local community). Tinto (1987) contends that

> One of the keys to effective orientation programs, indeed to effective retention programs, generally . . .[is] that they go beyond the provision of information per se to the establishment of early contacts for new students, not only with other members of their entering class but also with other students, faculty, and staff of the institution. Effective orientation programs serve as a linchpin about which advertising of institutional services are provided in an integrated and systematic manner (pp. 146-147).

Bringing key student support professionals to freshman orientation classes would be an effective strategy for intrusively and personally introducing them to students; individual students may then be more likely to seek their services on subsequent occasions. Tinto (1987) argues that

> Orientation programs frequently fail to provide information in a form which leads new students to establish personal contacts with the individuals and offices which are responsible for providing advising and counseling services and/or who can provide the types of information new students require (p. 146).

Empirical support for this argument is provided by research of Cartledge and Walls, Kramer and White, Potter and McNairy (cited in Fidler & Hunter, 1989) indicating that freshman seminar participants know more about student services and use them more often (Wilkie & Kuckuck, 1989), especially if student-service professionals make class presentations (Fidler, 1991). Moreover, the importance of these findings for student retention is underscored by research indicating that students who do utilize campus resources are more likely to persist to graduation (Churchill & Iwai, 1981).

One strategy to increase the likelihood that students will contact support professionals and use their services is to structure required class activities or course assignments such as the following:

- class "field trips" to key student-support offices on campus;
- personal interviews conducted by students with support professionals;
- student reports or a class presentation on the variety of services/resources on campus;
- student meetings with their advisors to discuss long-term plans for an academic major and career.

Requiring completion of such assignments is an effective intrusive strategy for guaranteeing that students come in contact with support services. It represents yet another advantage of conducting freshman orientation as a credit-earning course, one in which such assignments can be justified as course requirements and student effort can be recognized with college credit and a course grade.

An even more intrusive approach to ensure regular contact between students and their academic advisor is to have the course instructor's advisees enroll in his/her section. Concordia College has successfully implemented this procedure by conducting a freshman seminar, required of all incoming freshmen, in which faculty teach the course and advise only students in their own course section (Concordia College, Wisconsin, 1989).

8. Institutions should use the freshman orientation seminar as a mechanism for gathering important entry data on the freshman class. Comprehensive student assessment at entry would be useful for (a) academic advisement by providing information collected on student interests, attitudes, and aptitudes being used to facilitate academic-program and career planning; and (b) institutional research by providing information gathered on entering student characteristics to be used for subsequent retention research and student-outcomes or value-added assessment.

Such systematic, comprehensive assessment of students at entry is a strategy that is recommended often for promoting student development and institutional effectiveness (Adelman, 1986, Jacobi, Astin, & Ayala, 1987). But a common roadblock to its implementation is finding enough time and getting enough students to do it. The freshman seminar could function as an effective vehicle for overcoming each of these obstacles because it allows the time needed for such comprehensive assessment (since it is a full-semester course with numerous "contact" hours), and it houses a substantial number of entering students particularly if the course is required for all freshmen. Furthermore, including entry testing as an early component of the freshman seminar may also serve to heighten student interest and effort in the assessment process because it becomes an in-class activity associated with a credit-earning course.

9. Institutions should involve upper-class students in the freshman orientation seminar as peer counselors or peer mentors. Moore et al. (1984) point out that, with traditional-aged students,

> The combination of being on their own for the first time, and being especially subject to the influence of their peers cannot be forgotten in planning orientation programs . . . Programs should contain special topics to meet these needs and should capitalize on peer group support and influence to reinforce whatever learning is planned (p. 41).

The use of peers as paraprofessional teachers in the classroom has the following advantages:

- ✦ peers may elicit involvement of freshman students more effectively because they are not perceived as intimidating authority figures;
- ✦ the peer teachers' involvement (and retention) at the college will be enhanced because of increased contact with a faculty member;
- ✦ peer teachers can be expected to develop higher-level cognitive skills as a result of the teaching experience (Whitman, 1988);
- ✦ peer teachers are a very cost-effective form of student support.

Incentives for recruiting peer teachers for the freshman seminar could be provided in the form of academic credit (e.g., under the rubric of peer leadership) or official recognition on a student-activity or co-curricular transcript.

10. If possible, institutions should involve parents in the freshman orientation seminar. Parents can play a key role in either supporting or sabotaging their adolescent's college adjustment by how they handle their child's move away from home and independent living and by how they support or interfere with their adolescent's decisions regarding choice of a major and career.

> Orientation programs and services should help the families of entering students understand what their sons, daughters, or spouses are about to experience [and] the academic and personal adjustments entering students must make; more importantly, they need to know how support, advice, and

encouragement can make a difference in the success of their loved ones (Upcraft & Farnsworth, 1984, pp. 28-29).

Family support for entering minority students may be especially critical because they are often first-generation college students. Wright, Butler, Switzer, and Masters (1988) point out that, "The pressure of being the first may be increased if other family members were not able to attend college because of racial bias or limited economic resources. Entering minority students do not come to college alone; the entire family enrolls vicariously" (p. 56).

Upcraft, Peterson, and Moore (cited in Fidler & Hunter, 1989) report research which indicates that students who maintain compatible relationships with their families after entering college are more likely to succeed. Empirical evidence also has been gathered which suggests that parent orientation programs are effective in increasing parental awareness of key adjustments facing freshmen (Holland & Gillingham, 1980), as well as increasing parental knowledge of student resources and rapport with student-support professionals (Cooper & Robinson, 1987). Such benefits of parent orientation have also been found to have a long-term effect which persists up to at least six months after program attendance (Celio, 1973).

Ideally, parents might be brought to campus for a seminar/workshop to discuss these college-related issues with their adolescents and the orientation instructor (e.g., on a "Parents' Day" or "Parents' Weekend"). During this visit, parents could also be exposed to key student-support professionals on campus so that they become more aware of the full range of support services available to their son or daughter. The active involvement of parents in the program could be solicited via question-and-answer sessions or role plays simulating common freshman-year adjustments.

Such a parents' day or weekend would not only serve as good public relations for the college, but would also serve the more altruistic and retention-enhancing purpose of familiarizing the parent with institutional support services. Therefore, if their own adolescent is experiencing a particular college-adjustment problem, the parents would have the knowledge needed to refer and encourage their son or daughter to use the relevant campus support service.

If it is not feasible to bring parents to campus for such a workshop, another option would be to have the freshman seminar instructor develop an assignment which would require students to discuss college adjustment issues with their parents. For example, students could interview their parents regarding their expectations of the college experience, where their expectations originated (e.g., personal experiences, media, word-of-mouth exchanges with other parents), as well as their hopes and concerns about what will happen to their son or daughter in college. Information concerning campus support services could be communicated to parents via a simple assignment, such as requiring the student to give their parents a "matching" test. Such a test would require the parent to match a list of common freshman adjustment problems with the college's student support service designed to address that particular problem. Students could score the test and provide their parents with an answer key that they could keep for future reference. Harmon and Rhatigan (1990) developed an orientation course for parents.

If none of these intrusive strategies for actively involving parents in the freshman seminar are viable for the institution, then, at the very least, special orientation materials could be developed specifically for parents and mailed to them during the first semester, or prior to their adolescent's initial registration. For example, the University of Maine publishes a newsletter, "Family Focus," which is sent three times a year to the families of freshman students (Strumpf & Brown, 1990).

Course Content For the Freshman Seminar

The range of possible topics that could be discussed under the rubric, "freshman seminar," is almost limitless, while the amount of class time available for topic coverage is quite limited, particularly if the course is offered for less than three units of academic credit. One criterion for guiding decisions on whether a particular concept should be addressed is the degree to which that concept has been associated empirically with such positive student outcomes as student retention and student achievement. As Upcraft, Finney, and Garland (1984) argue, "Without such a framework, orientation becomes a potpourri of unrelated and ineffective activities that will have little influence on the lives of entering students" (p. 22).

Using empirical evidence as the key decision-making criterion, the following seven concepts are recommended as top-priority topics for inclusion in the freshman orientation seminar.

1. The Meaning, Value, and Expectations of a Liberal Arts Education. Under this topic, the following issues are recommended:

- ✦ clarifying student expectations and responsibilities with respect to the college experience,
- ✦ highlighting the key differences between high school and college,
- ✦ generating enthusiasm for higher education and suggesting strategies for getting the most out of the college experience,
- ✦ promoting understanding of college policies/procedures and increasing student knowledge of campus resources,
- ✦ clarifying the goals and purposes of liberal learning and general education,
- ✦ articulating how the liberal arts and general education courses are valuable for both personal and professional success in today's world.

Research conducted by Pace (1980) lends empirical support for including the above recommendations in the content of freshman orientation seminars. He conducted a comprehensive review of the research literature on college students' persistence and reported that students who come to college with unrealistic expectations of what the experience entails are more likely to have adjustment problems and to withdraw. Apprising new students of the realities and demands of college life may be an effective proactive strategy for minimizing the discrepancy between what students expect and what they get. However, this reality check has to be done in a way that does not intimidate or frighten students.

> Staff working with new, incoming students should be cognizant of the anxiety-laden time period inherent in the first few weeks of the semester. If a 'scare tactic' approach were undertaken during orientation, the result could be directly opposite the designed goal—some students might feel so threatened that they may decide to go home. Rather, a 'gentle but firm' approach to the issue of the student's relationship to the institution should be taken during the orientation process (Strumpf & Brown, 1990, p. 3).

Other research indicates that students frequently are confused about what liberal education is, and why general education courses are necessary (e.g., "Why must I take philosophy if I'm a business major?"). Astin (1975) found that two of the most frequent reasons reported for dropping out of college were "boredom with courses" and "dissatisfaction with requirements or regulations." He concluded, "These findings suggest that the academic programs of many undergraduate institutions fail to capture the interest of

substantial numbers of students, including some of the highest achievers" (p. 17).

Early discussion of the meaning and value of liberal education in the freshman seminar could serve to undergird students' understanding and appreciation of the general education requirements they will soon encounter. Pertinent to this contention is David Ausubel's research on *advance organizers*: preparatory material presented prior to learning which is at a higher level of familiarity and generality (inclusiveness) than more specific, detailed information that follows (Ausubel, 1968). For example, if students are about to study Buddhism, they are presented with a general overview of the Buddhist religion before they are exposed to any specific, detailed information on this topic. Ausubel has found that presentation of such advance organizers results in greater comprehension, retention, and transfer of specific information that follows (Ausubel & Youseff, 1963). In effect, the advance organizer provides a cognitive foundation or schema into which more detailed information can be meaningfully subsumed.

In higher education, the curricular sequence does not provide beginning college students with any advance organizer for the potpourri of individual general education courses they will encounter. Research indicates that the vast majority of general education programs consist of a series of discipline-specific courses that fulfill distribution requirements (Zemsky, 1989). Typically, there is no preparatory experience that provides a meaningful framework for appreciating the critical differences, similarities, and connections among the variety of disciplines comprising the liberal arts and general education curriculum. The freshman seminar could fill this gap in the college curriculum, providing an advance organizer to help students comprehend and appreciate the formidable number of individual, general education courses they will encounter during their early years in college. In addition, such meaningful discussion in the freshman seminar about interrelationships among the disciplines in the liberal arts may provide some integration and coherence to the general education curriculum, which recent national reports indicate is sorely lacking (Boyer, 1987; National Endowment for the Humanities, 1984; National Institute of Education, 1984).

Beginning students also need to have unfamiliar higher education jargon decoded for them so they can begin to understand the language of higher learning. They need to have the values/advantages of general education for their personal and professional development explicitly articulated for them (rather than assuming or hoping they will discover them by their own devices via forced exposure to distribution requirements). On the basis of his extensive research and consulting experience in the area of student retention, Noel (1985) concluded,

> As the bottom line, we find that students re-enroll when they have an exciting, substantive learning and personal growth experience that they can relate to their future development and success. We need to be more specific in interpreting for our students and potential students how the outcomes of education, the competencies they will develop with us, will be useful in adult roles beyond the classroom (p. 20).

This need for specific articulation of the value of higher learning is especially urgent for first-generation college students, a disproportional percentage of whom may be minorities. As Richardson (1989) points out,

> Many minority students grow up in barrios and ghettos or on reservations, where higher education is not an accepted way of becoming an adult. They must overcome not only inadequate preparation, but also their own doubts about the value of a college degree (p. A 48).

Furthermore, confusion about higher education jargon and the need for general education requirements may also extend to the parents of college students, especially parents of first-generation college students. This again suggests that some form of "parent orientation" would be a valuable component of the freshman seminar, during which parents could receive information and discuss issues such as: the meaning and value of liberal learning; the rationale for general education requirements; and the relationship between general education, majors, and careers.

The beginning college student often receives the heaviest dose of required general education courses, and failure to perceive the relevance of such courses may be one factor contributing to the present high rate of freshman attrition. Astin (1975) found that "dissatisfaction with requirements" is a frequently reported reason for dropping out. Other research indicates that "perceived irrelevance" of the college experience is a key reason students decide to leave college. Noel (1985) strongly suggests that a systematic, well-articulated discussion of the meaning and value of general education could enhance freshman retention. As Levitz and Noel (1989) state, "Improved retention rates are the by-product of efforts to provide freshmen with a substantive and motivating college experience" (p. 81). Introductory general education courses taken during the freshman year not only introduce students to different academic subjects, but they also introduce students to higher education. As such, these courses have the potential for creating powerful, long-lasting first impressions of the college experience. "In these formative experiences, [students] learn what it is to be a student, what is required to get by, what it means to acquire an education, and whether college is nothing more than acquiring job certification" (Spear, 1984, pp. 6-7).

Another relevant topic for discussion under the rubric of the "meaning, value, and expectations of general education" would be William Perry's research on the cognitive development of college students (Perry, 1970). His finding that beginning freshmen tend to perceive multiplicity of viewpoints as confusion and truth as absolute (and known by authorities) is diametrically opposed to the goals of liberal education—namely, to "liberate" students from single-minded dependence on authorities and uncritical acceptance of their ideas. Early discussion of this epistemological discrepancy between how freshmen tend to think and how college faculty want them to think, might serve to short circuit some of the confusion, frustration, and cynicism that Perry found among first-semester students (e.g., feelings that college instructors "hide the correct answer," "talk all over the place,"and that academic success involves "figuring out" what professors want and "giving them" what they want). The freshman seminar may be an effective mechanism for discussion of these common cognitive frustrations before they have any negative impact on students' academic performance or retention. Brown (1989) artfully expressed the need for such a proactive approach to rectify early misconceptions in student cognition:

> Left to their own devices freshmen use trial and error to learn how to play the academic critical thinking game. This is analogous to learning how to drive a car without an instructor. The task may be learned eventually, but the process will be time consuming and sloppy with many accidents and perhaps some fatalities along the way (p.85).

2. *Self-Concept and Self-Esteem.* Empirical evidence gathered on college students corroborates what teachers and counselors have long contended—that a positive self-concept is associated with higher levels of academic achievement (Gadzella & Williamson, 1984). High self-esteem has also been found to correlate with more effective study habits (Gadzella, Ginther, & Williamson, 1986), more diligent self-management (Thomas & Rohwer, 1987), lower levels of procrastination

(Solomon & Rothblum, 1984), and increasing grades from freshman to senior year (Willingham, 1985). After reviewing the research literature on the relationship between studying and academic achievement at elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels of education, Thomas and Rohwer (1987) conclude, "Overall, students' ratings of their self-concept of academic ability were found to be the best predictor of achievement at all grade levels" (p. 383). All these findings lend support to Maslow's (1954) classic "need hierarchy" concept (i.e., self-esteem is a more basic need than achievement and self-actualization, and as such, self-esteem must be met before these higher-level needs can be realized).

Maintaining a positive self-concept and academic self-confidence is especially critical for college freshmen. The reason for this is that students' grades tend to be lowest during their first year in higher education, then tend to improve during subsequent years (Willingham, 1985; Wilson & Linville, 1985). If the freshman student reacts to early mistakes and less-than-satisfactory beginning grades with negative self-talk and "catastrophizing" thoughts (e.g., "I knew college was not for me." "I don't belong here." "I don't have what it takes."), these reactions could result in a loss of self-esteem and early attrition.

Research suggests that we can influence students' self-perceptions and expectations of success. For example, Wilson and Linville (1985) provided intervention assistance for first-year college students who performed at a level below average during their initial semester and who were anxious about their poor performance. These students received information that their poor performance could be changed and that freshman grades are often lower than those obtained in future years of college. They were also exposed to upperclassmen who reported that their grades improved after their first semester. Those freshmen who participated in this experience evinced higher GPAs and lower attrition rates relative to a control group of freshmen who had similar first semester difficulties but did not participate in this intervention program.

Such findings suggest that the topic of self-concept/self-esteem should be vigorously addressed during the freshman seminar and that the following subtopics be discussed:

- ✦ the importance of self-esteem for academic and personal success;
- ✦ strategies for maintaining and enhancing self-esteem;
- ✦ strategies for reducing negative self-talk, "catastrophizing" thoughts, and fear of failure.

3. *Problem Solving and Decision Making: Selection of a College Major and a Future Career.* Under this topic, the following issues should be addressed:

- ✦ factors to consider when selecting major, minor, and elective courses;
- ✦ the relationship between college majors and professional careers;
- ✦ importance of one's career for personal identity and self-esteem;
- ✦ elements comprising a "good" career choice;
- ✦ strategies for improving the quality of career choice and employment prospects after graduation.

The importance of this topic is underscored by research indicating that three of every four freshmen are uncertain or tentative about their career choice (Titley & Titley, 1980). Well over half of all students who enter college with a declared major actually change their mind at least once before they graduate (Foote, 1980; Gordon, 1984b), and only one senior out of three will major in the same field

they preferred as a freshman (Willingham, 1985). Yet, paradoxically, only about 14% of college freshmen estimate they will change their initial major or career choice ("Fact File," 1989). Upcraft et al. (1984) note that much of this confusion may be due to the fact that, "Students may have been pushed into careers by their families, while others have picked one just to relieve their anxiety about not having a career choice. Still others may have picked popular or lucrative careers, knowing nothing of what they're really like or what it takes to prepare for them" (p. 18). Astin's (1975) research indicates that indecision about major and career goals is a significant factor associated with student attrition.

Astin's finding is supported by more recent research on the retention of minority students by Richardson (1989), who conducted on-site investigations of predominantly white institutions with impressive minority graduation rates. He found that one common element present in all these institutions was early provision of "career guidance to translate nonspecific educational goals into programs of study where course work and desired outcomes are clearly linked" (p. A48).

The need to introduce career information and guidance as part of a freshman orientation seminar is reinforced by survey findings which indicate that 75% of college students are worried about their job prospects after college, yet only 29% seek advice from the college's career-counseling office (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1986). Forrest (1982) reports evidence that extensive coverage of career exploration is one component of freshman-orientation programs found to be effective in promoting higher levels of student retention and achievement. Other research indicates that even a one-time, career exploration/clarification intervention, conducted early in the college experience, has a positive impact on the vocational identity of "undecided" students relative to a matched control group of students who do not receive this intervention (Buescher, Johnson, Lucas, & Hughey, 1989). The advantages of including such a career decision-making intervention within the context of a freshman orientation course is summarized effectively by Gordon (1984a) as follows:

> A particularly effective vehicle for helping undecided students with the information-gathering step that is critical to educational planning is the freshman orientation or seminar course. Self-assessment activities may be accomplished in class and processed immediately. By giving academic credit for the class, the institution shows support and emphasizes the importance of educational planning and decision making (pp. 138-139).

4. *Goal Setting and Motivation.* Under this topic, the following issues should be addressed:

- ✦ setting realistic long-term and short-term goals;
- ✦ distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation--for example, pursuing a major and career for reasons of personal interest or fulfillment rather than expected monetary gain or prestige;
- ✦ distinguishing between internal and external locus of control--for example, choosing a major and career that reflects a personal decision rather than a parental decision;
- ✦ strategies for maintaining and improving motivation--for example, developing peer support networks.

The importance of motivation and effort for college success has always been a conceptually compelling argument; and, more recently, research evidence has made this argument empirically compelling as well. For instance, Astin (1975) found that students' level of

aspiration is one of the best predictors of persistence to graduation; this finding also holds true for minority students (Astin, 1982). Lenning, Beal, and Sauer (1980) also found that students' motivation and commitment to goals are correlated positively with persistence to graduation, and this correlation is strong for both men and women (Anderson, 1988). In addition, Willingham (1985) reports that "poor sense of direction" is one of the most frequently cited reasons identified by students as a factor detracting them from experiencing a more successful and satisfying college career. Pace (1980) concluded from his review of the research that, "Quality of [student] effort is the most influential single variable in accounting for students' attainment. . . . The conclusion is this: What counts most is not who you are or where you are but what you do" (p. 16). This is a key message to convey to students early in their college experience, and the freshman seminar course is an ideal context in which to deliver it.

5. *Learning Skills and Strategies: Learning How to Learn.* Pantages and Creedon (1978) reviewed 25 years of retention research and conclude that there is a strong correlation between low freshman grades and attrition. Other research has revealed that academic concerns are the number-one ranked source of stress reported by college students (Beard, Elmore, & Lange, 1982; Mullinix, Fadden, Broch, & Gould, 1980). "Ask entering students what they fear most about going to college, and they will probably say 'flunking out'" (Upcraft et al., 1984, p. 14). More recently, Astin et al. (1987) found that today's freshmen are less likely to rate themselves "above average" in academic ability than freshmen of any other year since 1966. Guskey (1988) reports that, "Reviews of studies on student attrition again emphasize that the academic variable having the strongest influence on students' decisions to withdraw or persist is their academic performance in the very first semester they are enrolled in a college or university, particularly as reflected in first-semester grades" (p. 69).

These findings point to the value of a thorough discussion of learning skills and strategies in the freshman orientation seminar. Under this topic the following issues should be addressed:

- strategies for lecture comprehension and note-taking—for example, sitting "front and center," troubleshooting note-taking "gaps" with a friend immediately after class. Beard et al., (1982), found note-taking to be college students' number-one ranked source of academic difficulty.
- strategies for improving reading comprehension;
- study strategies—for example, value of "distributed" study sessions, strategies for effectively organizing to-be-studied information, self-monitoring strategies for assessing comprehension of studied material;
- memory improvement strategies such as mnemonic devices;
- learning styles—for example, difference between deep and shallow information processing styles;
- test-taking strategies—for example, becoming "test wise," reducing test anxiety;
- library research strategies—for example, distinguishing between primary and secondary sources of information, conducting computer-assisted literature searches, utilizing effective skimming strategies;
- strategies for writing term papers and reports—for example, defining and avoiding plagiarism, demonstrating critical thinking in written work, and appreciating the importance of writing a first draft with subsequent revisions.

Freshmen often report that college requires substantially more demanding academic skills than those utilized in high school--more emphasis on the lecture method of instruction and copious note-taking; more emphasis on testing, especially multiple-choice tests; and heavier amounts of reading, writing, and library research (Cuseo, 1987). Research conducted by Thomas and Rohwer (1987) is consistent with these anecdotal reports. They found a significant difference between the academic demands of secondary education and postsecondary education, with college demanding more integration of information and requiring a qualitative shift in information processing. The emphasis in college moves away from factual recall and rote memory, toward more emphasis on selective and self-generated study activities. Mellon (1986) conducted a study of beginning college students in freshman composition courses and found that roughly 80% of these students were experiencing some form of "library anxiety." They reported feeling "scared," "helpless," "confused," or "lost" when attempting to do library research. Furthermore, many of these same freshmen also reported feeling ashamed to ask for assistance because they thought their peers were much more knowledgeable than they; and by asking questions of peers or professionals, their "peculiar" ignorance would be revealed.

Research provides empirical support for the effectiveness of academic support programs (Kulik, et al., 1983). They conducted a meta-analysis of a large number of studies and found that students who participate in study-skill improvement programs display higher levels of academic achievement and higher retention rates when compared to students of similar ability who do not participate in such programs. Further support for the effectiveness of academic-skill development programs is provided by the New Jersey Department of Higher Education. State higher education officials initiated a program in which all incoming freshmen in the state's public colleges and universities were administered basic-skills tests; students who performed poorly on such tests were enrolled in skill-development classes.

Follow-up research indicates that students participating in such classes had levels of persistence and academic achievement equivalent to a control group of students who did not participate in the special academic support program because of higher entering basic-skills scores (New Jersey Basic Skills Council, 1986). This local finding was corroborated by a large-scale, meta-analysis of 562 studies designed to investigate the effects of study- and test-taking skill programs. This comprehensive analysis reveals that student participants in such programs manifest less test anxiety, improved study performance, and higher GPAs compared to matched control groups of non-participants (Hembree, 1988).

Such support is critical, especially for minority students, because a disproportionate number of those who enter higher education are identified as academically "high risk" or "withdrawal prone." For instance, over two-thirds of all black freshmen and one-half of Hispanic freshmen enter the California state system with a waiver on regular admissions criteria. The five-year graduation rate for black freshmen who enter by waiver is 7%, and for Hispanic freshmen, the rate is 4% (Richardson, Simmons, & de los Santos, 1987). These retention statistics suggest that comprehensive and intrusive academic support for minority students (as could be accomplished in a special section of the freshman seminar) is critical for reducing their exceedingly high rate of attrition.

Research conducted by McKeachie, Pintrich, and Lin (1985) highlights the value of offering academic-skills support in the form of a credit-earning course. They found that a three-unit "Learning to Learn" course dealing with such concepts as attention, memory, motivational strategies, and test-taking strategies resulted in higher subsequent GPAs for course participants as compared to a control group of

students who did not take the course. The course was especially beneficial to the academic performance of anxious students.

These researchers note that one element of the course that contributed to its positive impact was discussion of the underlying rationale as to why the presented learning strategies were effective, as opposed to just offering them in "cookbook" form.

The University of Oregon's Special Admissions Retention Program provides empirical support for the value of offering credit-earning, learning skills courses specifically for at-risk minority students. This program has received national attention for the beneficial impact it has on minority retention. The Univesity of Oregon admits a percentage of minority freshmen who do not meet admissions requirements each year; these students are then provided support through a "first year curriculum" designed to increase their academic skills. Results indicate that students who participate in the academic support course of study have exceptionally high retention rates (Colorado State Higher Education Executive Officers, 1987).

Grambling University, an historically black institution, reports findings that reinforce the value of including coverage of standardized test-taking strategies as part of the academic skills course. A test-taking skills program offered to teacher education students resulted in a substantial improvement in their standardized test scores; for example, the pass rate for their first-time test takers of the National Teacher Examination (NTE) was 80%. This figure was markedly higher than the national average for minorities (O'Brien, 1987).

Based on an extensive review of successful programs for first-year adult students, Copland (1989) reports that "some program components contribute significantly to the smooth reentry of adults and subsequent retention .... The two most important ingredients are orientation programs geared to adults and study-skills courses and seminars" (p. 314). Inclusion of a substantive "learning and academic-skill strategies" unit within a well-developed freshman seminar might be an effective strategy for simultaneously implementing these two key elements of successful adult reentry programs.

The convergence of all these research findings strongly suggests that provision of support in the area of learning skills is an essential component of an effective freshman orientation seminar. In addition to this coverage of learning skills, the topic of learning styles could also be introduced. After recently reviewing the learning styles literature and its implications for college instruction, Claxton and Murrell (1987) suggest that, "Inventories of learning styles . . . can be used to help make college students aware of their own preferences and strengths. Attention should also be given to helping them develop strategies for succeeding in courses taught in ways that are incongruent with their primary learning abilities" (p. vi). Other research indicates that utilization of certain learning styles strongly correlates with academic success in college. For example, "deep processors," students who systematically organize main ideas and their interrelationships, earn signficantly higher grades than "shallow processors," students who process information at "face value" without attempting to elaborate on it or relate it to already-known concepts (Miller, Alway, & McKinley, 1987).

Moreover, there is evidence that such effective learning styles can be taught in college courses. For instance, Biggs and Rihn (1984) taught a college course in which students were instructed on how to use deep processing study strategies. Results indicate that students who are taught these strategies display significant achievement gains and higher academic motivation. Weinstein and Underwood (1985) also taught elaboration strategies to students in a university-level course and found that such students exhibit significant increases in the use of effective learning strategies,

improved reading comprehension, higher grades in subsequent courses, and lower levels of academic anxiety.

Such findings suggest that the retention and academic success of freshmen should be enhanced by early exposure to effective learning styles. These strategies could be adopted early in the college student's career, before less effective approaches become habitual. Faculty should not assume that new students will eventually discover effective approaches simply through hard work and random, trial-and-error experience. Thomas and Rohwer (1987), following their review of the research literature on the relationship between studying and academic achievement, conclude:

> The present results cast doubt on the currently popular position that academic achievement can be elevated simply and directly by increasing the time students are required to spend on homework. Instead, it appears that achievement depends on the kinds of study activities students deploy during this time and the congruence between these activities and the instructional demands and supports of their courses (p. 385).

6. Self-Management: Managing Time and Stress. Under this topic, the following issues should be addressed:

- ✦ increasing awareness by students of how they spend personal time and how this reflects individual priorities and values;
- ✦ self-discipline–for example, strategies for developing good work habits, breaking bad habits, and increasing concentration;
- ✦ strategies for improving time management and organization--for example, list making, setting task priorities;
- ✦ strategies for overcoming procrastination–for example, dividing large tasks into smaller, more manageable subtasks;
- ✦ identifying sources of college stress and effective coping strategies, gaining control of irrational anxiety-provoking thoughts.

Research indicates that a higher percentage of students report experiencing stress-related problems during their freshman year than during the remaining three years of college, and a higher proportion of freshmen report seeking psychological help for stress-related problems than upperclassmen (Houston, 1971). Research conducted by Mullinix et al. (1980) indicates that time-management problems represent one significant source of stress for college students, and these difficulties are not just peculiar to low-achieving students. Even honors students report significant stress with respect to time-management issues (Stephens & Eison, 1986-1987).

Anecdotal reports from freshmen often indicate that one of the major adjustments they experience while making the transition from high school to higher education is dealing with free time (Cuseo, 1987). Compounding this temporal freedom is the personal freedom they suddenly embrace, as there is less intense supervision by authority figures. Teachers often do not take course attendance or check up on students to see if they did their homework, and there are no parents to impose house rules or curfews. This "free-at-last" feeling of independence from restrictive high school and parental policies, which Gardner (1987) suggests may be perceived by some students as akin to "release from a minimal-security prison," may be abused to the point of academic irresponsibility. Such newly encountered freedoms and accompanying responsibilities represent a significant life adjustment for college freshmen. Thus, support in the areas of time-management and self-discipline is a valuable component of an effective freshman orientation seminar.

Research conducted by Astin (1975) involving over 300 institutions and over 1,000 students provides empirical documentation for this argument. Astin discovered that specific student self-report items which are significantly correlated with college persistence include "turned in assigned work on time" and "did my homework at the same time every day." Items strongly associated with dropping out include "had trouble concentrating on assignments" and "studied with the radio or record player on." Also, Roueche and Roueche (1982) conducted an intensive, three-year study of community colleges in Texas and conclude, "Students have unrealistic expectations about their ability to accommodate work and school commitments" (p. 35). In a more recent study of first-term freshmen who earned lower-than-average grades during their initial semester on campus, more than 40% report that they feel their poor academic performance was due to "inability to concentrate, lack of personal discipline, over-emphasis on extracurricular activities, and unrealistic idea(s) of the amount of study required" (Hart & Keller, 1980, p. 530).

Taken together, the results of these studies suggest that early and intrusive support for students in the areas of time management and self discipline are valuable for promoting their college adjustment and persistence to graduation. Empirical support for this suggestion is provided by Potter and McNairy, (cited in Fidler & Hunter, 1989) who found that students who participate in a freshman seminar course score significantly higher on a measure of self-discipline relative to a matched control group of nonparticipants. Rice (cited in Fidler & Hunter, 1989) also found that freshman seminar participants report more significant gains in a survey of study habits compared to a matched control group.

The importance of time management skills for student persistence and achievement may be especially critical for the burgeoning numbers of commuter and adult students. Research suggests that for such nontraditional students demands placed on their time by work and family responsibilities play a significant role in their retention and achievement (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Greenfeig and Goldberg (1984) argue that orientation is an essential mechanism for providing institutional support in this area because, "A returning adult who is already a wife, mother, and community volunteer adds unfamiliar pressures, deadlines, and tensions to an already full schedule. Orientation must help returning adults develop skills for coping with these tensions and help them realize the opportunities gained from combining college with employment and family roles" (p. 82).

Early institutional support in the area of time-management, intrusively delivered via a special section of the freshman seminar, may facilitate the ability of nontraditional students to deal with the stress of this "role overload" and increase the likelihood they will persist to graduation.

7. *Interpersonal Relations.* Under this topic, the following issues should be addressed:

- ✦ verbal and nonverbal communication skills;
- ✦ active and empathic listening skills;
- ✦ dealing with interpersonal conflict and anger--for example, handling roommate disagreements, "fair-fighting" techniques;
- ✦ assertiveness--for example, strategies for approaching faculty, taking advantage of institutional resources, becoming actively involved in campus and community life;
- ✦ overcoming shyness;
- ✦ friendship formation and intimacy;
- ✦ interracial and cross-cultural relations --for example, techniques for

> improving interracial/cross-cultural communication and understanding, strategies for reducing ethnocentrism, prejudice, and discrimination.

In addition to academic adjustments, students must make significant social adjustments during the first year of college, such as living away from home for the first time, being separated from family and hometown friends, fitting in within a new social network, assertively resisting new forms of peer pressure, and adjusting to life with a new roommate. Gardner, 1987, has noted that higher education is the only American institution other than prison and the military that "forces" individuals (freshmen) to live with total strangers!

Research indicates that college students report "interpersonal relations" to be a major source of stress (Beard, et al., 1982). The ability to establish close college friendships also plays an important role in students' educational success (Billson & Terry, 1982), especially if such friendships are established during the first month on campus (Simpson, Baker, & Mellinger, 1980). The importance of social factors in college retention is documented by findings showing that students who are more socially integrated or involved in college life and feel they are part of the campus community are more likely to persist to graduation (Tinto, 1987). For instance, retention rates are significantly higher for students who live on campus, who are members of campus fraternities/sororities, and who are involved actively in extracurricular campus activities (Terenzini, 1986).

Findings reported by Astin (1977) indicate that even after students' pre-enrollment characteristics, college environmental factors, and student-involvement variables are controlled, persisting students have larger increases in the area of interpersonal self-esteem relative to dropouts. This finding holds true for males, females, and students of all ability levels. Astin also found that, regardless of the institution, students' confidence in their interpersonal skills leads to more out-of-class contact with faculty, which other research indicates is an especially potent correlate of students' college satisfaction, retention, and achievement (Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 1985).

The relevance of social adjustment and interpersonal-skills support may be especially critical for the college success of minority students.

> Tomorrow's minority students must see themselves empowered to demand quality services and to take full advantage of colleges' vast academic and support services. Retention programs will have to provide innovative ways to train or teach students such empowerment skills as perseverance, self-confidence, assertiveness, stress management, bilingual and cross-cultural communication skills, to name a few. Empowering minorities with these necessary life skills is a new responsibility of tomorrow's retention services to which we must respond with enthusiasm and renewed energy (Wright, et al., 1988, p. 126).

Research on minority students supports this contention; findings indicate that adjustment to a predominantly white college environment is a difficult task (Centra, 1980) and that such adjustment difficulties contribute significantly to the minority attrition rate (Suen, 1983). In his synthesis of research on retention, Tinto (1987) concludes,

> The limited evidence we have regarding programs for disadvantaged students suggests their persistence depends greatly on academic support and, among disadvantaged minority students, also on the character of their social participation in the communities of the institution (p. 160).

Taken as a whole, research on student retention indicates that institutional support in the

areas of interpersonal skills building and social adjustment can have great potential for enhancing the retention of college students, in general, and minority students, in particular. Incorporating such support as an integral component of a freshman orientation seminar would ensure that it is delivered early and intrusively.

Conclusion

The purpose of this report is to provide well-grounded, research-based guidelines for deciding on the administrative delivery and course content of the freshman orientation seminar. Such guidelines may be especially relevant today because there is now a growing awareness of the importance of the freshman year experience and the value of a freshman seminar course. Increasing numbers of institutions are directing resources to the freshman year (El-Khawas, 1988), and the number of institutions offering full-semester orientation courses is rapidly expanding (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Over 40% of the institutions responding to the National Orientation Directors' Association (NODA) data bank report offering orientation courses for freshmen (Strumpf & Brown, 1990).

This surge of institutional support for the freshman has not been accompanied by a commensurate increase of institutional support for the beginning transfer student. In fact, a recent review of the literature revealed that orientation for transfer students is still woefully inadequate (Tinto, 1987). This is a particularly sobering finding in light of other research indicating that (a) roughly 47% of all our nation's freshmen are enrolled in public two-year colleges (American Council on Education, 1989), (b) the attrition rate of transfer students approximates that of freshmen who begin their college experience at a four-year institution (Garcia, 1987), and (c) institutional transfers are less likely to complete their four-year degree than persisters with similar characteristics who entered the institution as freshmen (Astin, 1975).

The substantial attrition rate of transfer students strongly suggests that they need an extensive, comprehensive orientation program as much as freshmen do. Transfer students are new to the institution just as freshmen are, and they may also experience a unique set of transitional adjustments. Astin (1975) articulates the major type of adjustment dilemma likely to be encountered by transfer students:

> One obvious problem is that students who enroll after the freshman year in collegiate institutions with a tradition of yearly classes beginning as freshmen and continuing through graduation are, in effect, interlopers on existing student culture. The difficulties of socialization and adjustment for the transfer student are apparent and institutions that accept transfer students should develop special programs to facilitate their smooth transition (p. 154).

Now may be the time to extend the benefits of the orientation seminar to the beginning transfer student by offering a transfer-student seminar for students entering four-year institutions at midstream. An excellent illustration of this strategy is a program which has been developed by South Mountain Community College in Phoenix. This two-year college collaborates with its major receiver institution, Arizona State University, to offer a university orientation program which includes a three-credit course jointly designed by faculty at both institutions (Donovan & Schaier-Peleg, 1988). In this fashion, the transfer-student seminar not only serves to facilitate the adjustment and retention of students in transition, it serves as a mechanism for promoting much needed partnership between two-year and four-year institutions as well.

Such intersegmental partnerships and transfer-transition programs may be especially effective for promoting the persistence of black and Hispanic students because these minority students are disproportionately represented among the community-college

student population (U.S. Department of Education, 1986-87); thus, minority students may represent a significant percentage of our nation's potential transfer students. If four-year colleges and universities begin to provide comprehensive, intrusively delivered transfer-student seminars (as they have freshman seminars), we may witness general improvement in the college persistence and achievement of minority students who have been historically underrepresented as college graduates.

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